

Social Activity of Teachers in the Non-governmental Organisations of Agrarian Areas, in the 1940-ies

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In the first half of the 20th century, close connection had been formed between the non-governmental associations of the agrarian society and the teachers of local schools. Reading circles established in the country side in towns, little villages, and the region of farms had a leading role in organising the community, in the cultural life, adult education, and providing library services. Teachers had similar functions, since a school ensured not only studies to children, but also (mainly at outskirts) manifested the centre of local education. It provided venue to cultural events, state and church celebrations, and offered informative lectures and courses for the adults, too. The school and the reading circle efficiently supplemented each other. The teacher and the members of the non-governmental associations could fulfil their functions effectively by relying on and mutually supporting each other. The teacher had a very important role in the actual implementation of the co-operation. It was the teacher who made rapport between the two institutions, who synchronised the two parties' efforts, who organised the joint programs (Szathmáry, 1947:542-546; Pogány, 2003:57).

In the first half of the 20th century, especially in smaller villages, there were few qualified people. Consequently, in most of the places, teachers were considered to be active members of the community, who agreed to fulfil several social and public life functions. Teachers fostered the establishment of local non-governmental associations in order to join forces of village or outskirt population, to enhance their general and economic knowledge, and to create opportunities for civilized entertainment. At several places, farmers being uninformed in official matters requested advices and co-operation from the teacher in creating the organisational structure and the rules of operation, and in documenting their activity. Their first discussions and meetings were held in the building of the school (Szarvas, 1995:121; Herczeg & Kruzslicz, 2000:160).

Teachers had an important function in compiling the statutes defining the associations' internal life and activities. The statutes

always reflected the members' values, and endeavours. However, in the course of its compilation, particular statutory rules had to be taken into consideration, since a specialised minister's approval was required to the operation of reading circles. Therefore the management of the establishing associations generally requested the teacher to prepare the document. They discussed their ideas with him and he compiled the statutes in an appropriate form. Even later on, the organisations often turned to the local teacher to ask for help in writing their reports and applications to be sent to various official organs. When recognising the opportunities inherent in the non-governmental associations, teachers frequently lobbied for their sake. They applied for financial support from the cultural authorities to build clubhouses for reading circles, and they also urged for supplying the associations with larger libraries (Nagy, 1975:381).

Consequently, non-governmental organisations and local teachers directly collaborated right from the beginning. In smaller villages and in the outskirts, in addition to the pub, the only hall that was suitable for accepting a larger group of people was in the school. Thus it was quite usual that until the reading circle or the farmers' society could not build or purchase its own clubhouse, their meetings were held in the building of the school. In the 1920-ies, in one part of the more than 2000 farm schools established by Kuno Klebelsberg minister of education and religious affairs, a separate club hall was also built, which was used by the established non-governmental association or youth organisation. This specific design of the school building also meant that supporting the non-governmental organisations operating there was regarded to be the task of the teacher, too (Rostás, 1994:3).

Having accomplished the building of clubhouses for reading circles, it was quite frequent that the non-governmental associations helped the teacher by providing temporary venue for school education. When - due to any reason - the building of the school became unsuited for teaching - e.g. due to the lack of fuel for winter, damages caused by flood or inland waters or destructions during World War II. - teaching was continued in the association's clubhouse. Helpfulness of reading circles was not only due to the principle of communal solidarity. There were also personal relationships between the two institutions: the children and grandchildren of the association's members attended the local school. The fact that the school work and the programs of the reading circles did not interfere with each other played also an important role. Teaching took place mainly in the morning, when the members of the association worked. School lessons got finished by the time of the afternoon or evening meetings (Beck, 1985:240; G. Tóth, 1987:290).

Non-governmental associations regarded it as one of their key functions to patronise local schools. This was also included in their

statutes in the cases of most of the organisations. Reading circles made their libraries available for teachers and students. They frequently also supported the local school by donations, purchase of educational tools or by providing food and fuel. Smaller maintenance and repair works were performed by the members of the associations. Children living farther from school were often taken to school by volunteers by horse-drawn carriages. The statutes of most of the reading circles ordered that upon its break-up, the association's assets should be used for supporting the local school (Hajdú, 1977:22).

In most of the places, co-operation of teachers and reading circles was characterised by close and manifold relationship. Despite this fact, it was not typical that teachers would join the association and undertake any managerial functions there. It was because the teachers were allocated to a town or village centrally. Associations always represented the endeavours of a local community, in which the new teacher allocated there from another region was not automatically involved. Members of the organisations elected the management from among the persons who they had known well for long and who had already proved their aptitude. It required a longer period of time to regard a teacher appointed there *ex officio* as „one of them“. In addition to the varied school and public educational tasks, even the teachers were not inclined to undertake any position requiring constant engagement. If despite this fact they became members of the management of an organisation, they - in accordance with their capabilities - undertook or were mainly appointed to be a notary, a librarian, a financial controller or a secretary of culture. It was an exceptional case, when a teacher held the post of an association president (Nagy, 1975:388; Beck, 1985:262).

One of the important tasks of the agrarian society's associations was to improve culture and enhance the know-how of farming. In the field of adult training, teachers played an outstandingly important role. On the one hand, they organised various general knowledge or farming related lectures, and courses, while on the other hand, they were also involved in training. It was a basic prerequisite of launching various training programs that the head of the course should have had at least secondary qualifications. That was why without the collaboration of local teachers it would not have been possible to organise adult training courses in villages and in the region of farms and ranches (Leléné Erdélyi, 1996:261; Szabó, 2007:90-92).

Non-governmental associations generally organised 6-8 informative lectures per year, but at larger associations there could be even 10-15 lectures held. Most of the reading circles launched some kind of a course every year or every other year. Even

associations with the least financial funds created opportunity for their members to train themselves. In 1946, all over the country, there were a total of 135,000 informative lectures held and non-governmental associations launched 2,500 various courses, in which approx. 31,000 lecturers were requested to collaborate. A significant part of the training courses were organised by the reading circles or farmers' societies. In their implementation, thousands of teachers took part (Hajdú, 1977:123; Simándi, 1943:19).

Several associations joined the movement aiming at the winding up of illiteracy. It had great significance especially between the world wars, but one part of the adult society were not able to read and write even after World War II. The government allocated the task to teach adults to read and write basically to schools. However, the members of the reading circles, especially the older ones, were often averse from sitting back into school desks. To go to the place to study where their children and grandchildren are taught during the day. They were much happier to enrol to the course, if it was organised by their associations in the clubhouses of their reading circles. The courses for teaching basic skills were organised in several forms. Acquiring reading and writing skills generally was embedded in a 60-hour training. If the training included counting and measurement materials, too, usually an 80 -100-hour course was organised. Only certified teachers could hold the courses incorporating basic knowledge which were launched in the associations. During the course, student books published for elementary schools were used. The training ended with an official final exam that was held in the presence of a representative assigned by the education authorities. Successful accomplishment of the course was acknowledged by a certificate (Katona, 1941:59-60).

Reading circles often organised 30 -60-hour general knowledge courses for adults, which mainly served the purpose of brushing up and updating the knowledge acquired in elementary school, as well as its adaptation to adult life. The training took place twice a week, after the daily work, in the evenings. The lecturers were mostly local teachers. The other group of courses contained 150-160-hour winter-time general knowledge courses. Their purpose was primarily to widen and update the elementary school knowledge, to enhance the general culture, which also prepared adult students to further studies (Madácsy, 1947:53; Juhász, 1991:48).

The educational authorities specified the system of requirements and the main theme units of the courses. However, the framework-like curriculum requirements ensured relatively broad clearing for local organisers and lecturers. The lessons were held by local teachers, secondary school teachers of close towns, and in the cases of particular topics by surgeons, lawyers, and office-holders. In the course of the training, mainly elementary and secondary school

student books or materials especially compiled for such courses were used, which they received from the educational authority. In addition to general knowledge training, there were farming courses of similar length also launched, where the professional subjects were taught by farming school teachers or more qualified farmers. In this case, local teachers taught subjects covering general culture (Kaczián, 1990:40-41).

In most of the places, teachers organised the implementation and the management of the courses. The teachers made the plans of the training programs jointly with the heads of the associations. This was always adjusted to the local community's requirements. In the case of the courses, the teachers filled with content the framework-like central curricula issued by the government. The structure of education was adjusted to mainly include the topics being relevant and interesting for the people living there. Applicants were usually recruited by the associations; they advertised the launch of the trainings in the local press, as well as the conditions of the application. In particular cases, however, e.g. upon the organisation courses of winding up of illiteracy, even the teacher's intercession was needed in order to encourage with all his weight the people concerned to enrol for the course. It was the teacher holding the course who prepared the training plan, applied for the approval of the educational authorities, performed the required administration during the training, and also it was him/her who compiled the report to the supervisory organs after the accomplishment of the course (Hajdú, 1977:123; Beck, 1985:255).

Various entertaining evenings and amateur theatrical performances comprised an important part of the life of reading circles. Teachers generally played a leading role in their organisation and the preparation of the performers. They had major tasks in the selection of the play, the motivation of the actors, the directing of the play, and managing the rehearsals. In order to do this, they needed to have a particular awareness in literature, appropriate knowledge of human nature, adequate calibre, and authority to colligate the work. In smaller villages or in the wide region of farms and ranches, mostly the teacher had such skills. Preparation involved high responsibility. In many places, only cultural programs organised by non-governmental associations were available for local inhabitants. It was due to reading circles and farmers' societies that the inhabitants of real estates at the outskirts, small villages or the suburbs could watch theatrical performances and participate at entertaining evenings, folk music or folk dance shows. Common cultural events and entertainment had a significant community building role, and an important socialising impact (Simándi, 1947:750-751; Kovalcsik, 2003:585).

Preparation of entertaining evenings and theatrical performances demanded a lot of time and serious preparation both from the stage-director and the performers. Performing a play usually required a start-up period of 2 weeks for reading the play, which was followed by 2 -4 weeks rehearsal. The director often pre-acted the role for the shy ones, showed how the character needed to be acted out in his or her opinion. Rehearsals usually started after 6 p.m., and sometimes lasted until late night. The role players always made efforts to prepare the best they could, since all the relatives, acquaintances, and the population of the whole vicinity were present at the performance (Leléné Erdélyi, 1996:261; Beck, 1985: 248).

Sometimes casting was not an easy task, since people were not happy to act out a negative character, and there might be debates about casting the couples for the play, too. In order to handle the arising conflicts appropriately, high pedagogical sense was required. It was also a similarly important aspect to perform plays with educative effect to demonstrate moral values in the form of simple lessons. All this generally made it inevitable for the teacher to join in the amateur theatrical activities of non-governmental associations. Naturally, a lot depended on the teacher's personal character, too. It happened that some teachers did not feel vocation to it or did not want to accept the high amount of extra work incorporated in preparation. In most of the places, however, teachers actively participated in the preparation of entertaining programs of reading circles (Nagy, 1975:399-401).

Reading circles acknowledged teachers' work done for the sake of associations by regularly inviting the school's students to their events and entertaining performances. There were entertaining programs, sports competitions, and fun quizzes especially announced for the younger age groups. In other cases, they got free access to an entertaining afternoon, folk song or folk dance performance, or amateur theatrical performance compiled by the members of non-governmental associations. Primarily, in holiday seasons, there were family programs and afternoon tea parties organised in several places, where smaller children could also enjoy themselves. Schoolchildren often played roles in celebrations and upon anniversaries organised in the associations' clubhouses. In such cases, children always got a treat. Naturally, all this again multiplied the teachers' tasks by requiring special organisation and preparation. However, it had an extraordinarily remarkable impact on the community, as it strengthened its cohesion (Gregus, 1997:69; Baják, 2001:176).

One of the important areas of co-operation between teachers and associations was taking care of talents. The two institutions regarded it as a common affair to support gifted children living under poor circumstances. Teachers made efforts to find out the options for

further studies for the students, to make it happen for them and to prepare them for that. On the other hand, the leaders of the associations tried to convince the parents to let their children study. In order to achieve this, in the cases of a few students, they offered some small financial support despite their low financial resources. The associations' supporting reference was important from another point of view, too. Students were generally registered in the colleges operating all over the country based on the reference of local non-governmental associations (Szathmáry, 1947:543-544).

In 1940-ies, in several villages and towns, teachers were also involved in public administration functions. Office space for the administrative activities was mainly provided by non-governmental associations operating in the centrally situated areas of the region of farms and ranches. Public administration authorities established branch offices in these clubhouses of the reading circles. There was administration here for 1 -2 times a week, so that people living by could manage their most important official affairs locally. It means people did not need to go to the village or town offices in order to pay taxes and dues, to get various permits, to certify sales, to register, and to participate in any census, thus they did not lose much working time. In the associations' clubhouses, administrative tasks were performed by either appointed office-holders or local teachers, who were specifically prepared for this job and paid for it (Hollander, 1980:79; Hajdú, 1977:104).

In the middle of the 20th century, elementary and secondary school teachers played an outstanding role in the life and activities of non-governmental associations operating in agrarian regions. With their knowledge, organisational skills, and experience in public life they supported the operation of the organisations. They collaborated in adult training and holding entertaining events. They acted for the sake of enforcing the interests of local inhabitants, and also supported similar efforts made by reading circles. They synchronised the cultural and entertaining activities of the two cultural institutions of small villages and the region of farms and ranches: the school and the non-governmental association. Within the frames of non-governmental organisations, they were involved in various public life functions and administrative tasks. With all this, they highly contributed to keeping together the local community, and keeping them active, as well as to the strengthening of co-operation, and enhancing the level of culture.

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